

Caedmon
F.W. Garforth (1967)
Introduction to Bede's account of the poet
Cædmon

Cædmon is the earliest vernacular poet whose name is known to us. His *Hymn* addresses the Christian God with terms derived from heroic poetry. Cædmon's miraculous poetry bespeaks the divine support Anglo-Saxons felt God bestowed on the early Northumbrian church. Though Bede's account of Cædmon formed part of his Latin *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, completed in 731, the description here is excerpted from an Old English translation made during the reign of Alfred in the late ninth century as part of his programme of revitalising learning and encouraging the development of an English national identity.

The Miracle of
Cædmon

The Old English Bede's translation of *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV. 24, *Quod in monasterio eius fuerit frater, cui donum canendi sit divinitus concessum* ('How in this monastery there was a brother, to whom the gift of song was divinely given'), is thorough and accurate, save the instances identified in the notes to the text. What one says of Bede's account of the miracle of Cædmon also applies to the Old English Bede's account of the miracle of Cædmon.

The story of Cædmon; and his hymn is a frequent fixture on course in medieval literature, and is the first text included in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. This prominent position seems to derive from a fundamental misunderstanding of Bede's account of Cædmon, a misunderstanding countenanced even by Anglo-Saxonists:

According to the Venerable Bede, our first reliable English historian, English literature had a miraculous origin in the late seventh century in a religious somniloquy by an illiterate cowheard named Cædmon (Kiernan 1990, p. 157)

Bede does not say that Cædmon was the first English poet nor that he originated English literature. Bede makes it clear that *carminae* existed before Cædmon, though Cædmon had not learnt them. Bede's account of Cædmon is not really about Cædmon at all, but about the sanctity of Abbess Hild of Whitby and the religious achievements of her foundation. The chapter on Cædmon should be read alongside the previous chapter on the life and death of Hild (hence IV. 24 begins *in huius monasterio abbatissae*, 'in the monastery of this abbess') and as part of Book IV's ongoing description of the miracles accorded by God to the

Source URL: <http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/oecoursepack/caedmon/index.html>

Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl201/>

fledgling Northumbrian church. It has even been suggested that Bede derived his account of Cædmon from a lost *vita* of Hild.

Bede introduces Cædmon as a religious poet of unparalleled skill, capable of inspiring his audience to love good and despise evil. Such skill was surely divinely inspired. Earlier in his life, Cædmon did not know any poetry, which led him to leave the mead-hall whenever the harp came out. On one such occasion, going to look after the flocks entrusted to his care, he fell asleep and dreamt that someone appeared before him. This apparition challenged him to sing about the *principium creaturarum*, 'the beginning of created things'. Cædmon began to sing in verses he had never before heard, verses of which Bede gives the *sensus*, or general sense. After this vision, Cædmon told his master who took him to Hild, where he was assessed by a group of learned men who judged he had been inspired by heavenly grace. Cædmon was encouraged to take monastic vows, whereupon he was taught sacred history and versified what he learnt. Cædmon followed the Rule with great zeal, and was therefore granted foreknowledge of his death. This enabled him to undergo final unction and to die 'in charity with all the servants of God'. The ability of a saint to foresee his own death is a common hagiographical topos, and is just as important to Bede as the divine inspiration of Cædmon's song.

This leaves us with one more important thing to discuss, *Cædmon's Hymn* itself. Bede did not include the English text of the *Hymn* in the *Historia*, but preferred to give a Latin paraphrase of its contents, probably because he was writing for an international audience, some of whom he knew would not understand Anglo-Saxon. Rather, the *Hymn* is preserved in two distinct contexts, as a marginal addition to Latin manuscripts or embedded in the Old English Bede. It is not preserved on its own in any extant manuscript. The earliest texts of the *Hymn* are found in two early Northumbrian manuscripts of the *Historia*, the 'Moore Bede' (shortly after 737) and the 'Leningrad Bede' (731 x 746). In the former, the *Hymn* is added after the *Historia* proper has finished, and is followed by several miscellaneous glosses and some chronological notes. In the latter, the *Hymn* is found in the bottom margin of the folio containing Bede's account of Cædmon, in a hand smaller than that in which the main text is written. Though this manuscript established how the *Hymn* would be presented in Latin manuscripts of the *Historia*, the actual means of circulation is extremely complicated (those interested can read Dobbie 1937 and Cavill 2000). It has been suggested, indeed, that the Old English version of the *Hymn* was translated from Bede's Latin, and that Cædmon's original is either lost or a shibboleth (Kiernan 1990, Orchard 1996, Isaac 1997). Dissenters suggest that the *Hymn* circulated orally, and was occasionally added by scribes of the Latin *Historia* from memory (Cavill 2002). The most free versions of the poem are those embedded in the Old English Bede, where the scribes were inspired 'to draw on formulaic possibility' (O'Brien O'Keeffe 1987) and vary some of the poem's phrasing.

Source URL: <http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/oecoursepack/caedmon/index.html>

Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl201/>